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Hard Times for Neutralists

FROM A CORRESPONDENT LATELY IN LAOS

PRINCE SOUVANNA PHOUMA'S return from Europe to Laos last week presents a last fragile hope of a political settlement. The truth is that there is little positive enthusiasm for a coalition government—both sides are only considering a "neutralist" regime because they have nearly abandoned hope of achieving what they want by military means. The Pathet Lao have long known that the Americans would never allow them a complete military victory in Laos since this would not only have a shattering effect on Siam's morale, but would make the reinforcement and supply of the Vietcong guerrillas in South Vietnam much easier. Hence the Pathet Lao have consistently supported the idea of a Souvanna government, even though they would have only a quarter of the cabinet positions.

The Pathet Lao have another reason for their seeming moderation. They know that they are infinitely better organised, politically speaking, than their neutralist allies. At a recent cease-fire anniversary celebration in the *Plaine des Jarres* a meeting was addressed jointly by Pheng Phongsavan, deputy to Prince Souvanna, and by Nounhak, the chief Pathet Lao liaison officer at the neutralists' capital of Khang Khay. The largest meeting hall holds only 500 people, all of whom dutifully applauded both the moderate phrases of Pheng Phongsavan, and the speech of Nounhak, which sounded like a *Khmer* minor commentary. The significant point was that the neutralist was heard only by his immediate audience, while copies of the Pathet Lao speech were at once distributed in the streets. Even in the neutralist-administered *Plaine des Jarres* there is at least one Chinese communist bookshop, and bright Lycée students who might once have gone to Paris, now go to Hanoi.

The young neutralist commanders, whose troops look smart and well-disciplined, insist that they are not communists, or even fellow-travellers. They point out that they derive all their military supplies, and even food, from communist sources; how, then, can they refuse to accept, say, Vietnamese teachers? They claim, apparently with justification, that their army is entirely loyal to Prince Souvanna; but they agree that the longer coalition is delayed, the more likely they are to be merged with the Pathet Lao. Should full-scale civil war be resumed, some of the neutralist political leaders would go into exile, but their army would fight against General Phoumi.

Looking ahead, the neutralists claim that most of the Pathet Lao rank and file are Lao first and foremost, and that communist ideology is naturally repugnant to the Lao temperament. The neutralists claim undeclared allies among some of the Vientiane politicians, who are keeping as aloof as they can from the Phoumi-Boun Oum regime. Together, these young men say, they could prevent the country going communist, though they would, of course, be quite happy to have diplomatic relations with Hanoi and Peking, as with neighbouring Cambodia.

According to this optimistic theory, the American best weapon, once a coalition were formed, would be not the four right-wing-nominated members of the government, but the giving of financial aid, on the condition that the communists be kept out of power, and over by the communists. Prince Souphommavong, the Pathet Lao

he said that most observers do not accept this rosy view. The chances of resulting communist takeover for more than a year are perhaps only fifty-fifty. The Pathet Lao grass-roots organisation is good: almost certainly they would do well in election. One of the conditions of entering a coalition might perhaps be the postponement of elections for some considerable time.

All this, however, is somewhat hypothetical. General Phoumi is still hoping to persuade the Americans to intervene in the civil war. The official American view is that, quite apart from the political considerations, military intervention in Laos would inevitably lead to counter-action by the Chinese and North Vietnam. They also know that the fighting which preceded the disintegration of the royalist forces at Nani Tha was in fact provoked by General Phoumi. Nevertheless, discipline among the various kinds of American representatives and advisers in Vientiane, though better than a year ago, is still poor, and General Phoumi knows that he has many secret sympathisers in the Central Intelligence Agency and among American military personnel.

When the Americans first tried, in January, to get the Vientiane government to enter a coalition on terms acceptable to Prince Souvanna and the Pathet Lao, they cut off the economic aid of \$3 million a month, but they continued military aid and the salaries of their "White Star" team, who in fact, if not in theory, took part in actual fighting. Thus General Phoumi was not inclined to take the economic sanctions too seriously.

He knows that he himself and the foreign minister, Khammou Panha, are the only members of the Vientiane government who are unacceptable not only to the Pathet Lao but also to the neutralists. Even if, for form's sake, he were given an official position in a coalition government, his personal authority would be gone for ever. It is therefore likely that General Phoumi will resist all attempts to force him into a coalition, preferring to go into exile if it becomes necessary, but hoping that at the last moment the Americans will have cold feet, drop the Hanoi policy, and resume full support for the Vientiane regime.

Prospects for a Laos settlement, therefore, are not very bright. The partition suggestion made by Senator Dodd is quite intractable. Each side has pockets of influence within the territory generally controlled by the other. No artificial land frontier could possibly be drawn in so mountainous and wooded a country. If coalition negotiations should break down, there is on the side of the Pathet Lao. The neutralists in the middle will be squeezed out. Anyone who has been able to contrast the cynical realism of Vientiane with the dedicated fanaticism of the Pathet Lao can have little doubt of the eventual outcome. Only a massive American intervention, with its incalculable consequences, could restore the balance; and even then, nothing short of a full-scale military occupation could prevent the revival of Pathet Lao activity. Thus the West should spare no effort to save the negotiations and to make the calculated risk of a coalition government, which would be a calculated risk of a coalition government, which would be a calculated risk of a coalition government, which would be a calculated risk of a coalition government.